

# 5 Ways to Teach Your Kids Self-Control

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The benefits of self-discipline, while timeless in nature, have fallen out of favor in today's ultra-busy, ultra-competitive environment. In addition, the expectation of instant gratification has pushed the virtue of self-control to the back burner. Discipline of self isn't on display in the public's eye as it once was. Television reality programs show people behaving badly with little self-control of their emotions, actions, or words. At sporting events, athletes throw loud and obnoxious temper tantrums when a call or game doesn't go their way. In fact, the worse the reality TV stars and sports figures act, the better for ratings.

Maintaining self-control is an important component of conflict resolution. Exercising self-control in the midst of extreme provocation is essential to resolving conflict in a way that's fruitful for all parties involved.

We must remind our kids that they are masters of themselves. It seems obvious, but children do need to be told that they can control their reactions to events, people, circumstances, etc. They are not a leaf to be blown about in the wind—they have the ability to exercise control. It does take practice and perseverance to strengthen our self-control muscle. Here are some ways parents can guide their children's development of self-control.

**Show your struggles.** It can be difficult to teach self-mastery to our children if we don't embody it ourselves. All of us stumble in the area of self-control at one time or another. Share some of your "down" moments with your kids. For example, you could talk at dinner about how you lost your temper at work. Tell how you apologized and what steps you're taking to avoid future blowups, such as not scheduling meetings right before lunch because being hungry makes you irritable. Ask for prayer as you work through this loss of self-control. Revisit the issue later to show what progress you've made or what relapses you've suffered, and how you're continuing to press forward. Letting them see a snippet of how you wrestle with self-mastery can encourage them in their own struggles.

**Practice it.** Working on self-control is no different from practicing a sport. Professional athletes, for example, often do the same drills over and over again. Self-control can be acquired by practicing it again and again. Stress that losing self-control doesn't mean the child has failed. Setbacks are inevitable. What matters most is pressing forward to try again.

**Give them strategies.** When kids lose self-control, it's often manifested with hitting, kicking, and screaming. Good ways to stretch that self-control muscle include:

- Counting to ten before responding
- Removing yourself to settle down away from others
- Putting your head down on a desk, if at school
- Jumping on a mini-trampoline
- Running around the outside of the house

- Having an adult say a catchphrase when things heat up

“We had our kids sit on the steps until they got themselves under control,” said Christina Tarabochia of Tigard, Oregon. In our family, there have been times when a child has needed a secret word like “puppy” that we’ll say when that child begins to lose her cool. That has helped the child regain control and has headed off potential quarrels with siblings.

**Delay gratification.** Self-discipline can be taught by not giving in immediately to a child’s request. Don’t let them have their way just to gain quietness. Some ways to help children learn to wait include:

- Visiting stores without buying anything for the children
- Limiting the number of presents at holidays and birthdays
- Not giving snacks before dinner
- Making them wait their turn

These types of things will help the child’s self-control muscle grow.

**Use rewards sparingly.** Self-control is more about a child’s inner life than about her outer conformance. We want the child’s heart to be engaged in the waiting too. Don’t give constant positive reinforcement for every compliance or good job of waiting. For example, a child should wait her turn because it’s the right thing to do, not because she’ll get a lollipop if she does. Otherwise, a child won’t be able to wait without the promise—and deliverance—of a reward. However, every once in a while, a small reward for exceptional waiting behavior is okay.

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